



CD 2003--123

Thursday, November 13, 2003
12:10 pm. Walter Hall

Thursdays at Noon
presents

"Glimpses"
John Kruspe, piano

PROGRAMME

Beethoven:

Sonata Op. 81a in E-flat major

Adagio-Allegro "Das Lebewohl" ("Les Adieux")

Andante espressivo "Abwesenheit" ("L'Absence")

Vivacissimamente "Das Wiedersehen" ("Le Retour")

Schubert

Fantasy in C major op.15 "Wanderer"

Allegro con fuoco ma non troppo

Adagio

Presto

Allegro

Prokofiev

Sonata No.3 in A minor Op. 28 ("from Old Notebooks")

Allegro tempestuo

Biography

Pianist **John Kruspe** studied with Douglas Bodle and Anton Kuerti. A University of Toronto Faculty of Music graduate, he is a member of the teaching staff in the Theory and Composition division.

Programme Notes

glimpse: *noun*, circa 1540 1 *archaic* : glimmer (gleam) 2 : a fleeting view or look

Glimpses into the personal lives of these three composers are not hard to come by: through letters, sketchbooks and, in the case of Prokofiev, an autobiography, we are able to make a fairly detailed sketch of their lives and times. But through their music, that most personal of their utterances, they reveal very little; and when there is some programmatic content, it is either added by someone else, as in the 'Moonlight' Sonata, or downplayed by the composer: in the 'Pastoral' Symphony, Beethoven cautions that the music is more an expression of feelings rather than specific images.

Thus, today's program is an unusual combination, for all three works are strongly autobiographical, stemming from intensely personal, specific experiences about which the composers felt compelled to write.

Beethoven, *Sonata in E flat major op.81a* ("Les Adieux" or "Das Lebewohl")

"Psychoanalysts have noted a connection between loss and creativity. Hanna Segal, for example, states that '... when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and when we ourselves in helpless despair, it is then that we must re-create our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, re-create life'. George Pollock has turned this idea into a thesis termed 'the mourning-liberation process,' according to which 'the successful completion of the mourning process results in creative outcome.' Applying this idea to Beethoven's sonata, one may regard its first movement as depicting loss; the second mourning; and the third personal renewal. Thus seen, the sonata becomes a vehicle to one of Beethoven's favorite topics, namely the death of a hero and his subsequent resurrection. Indeed, there may be special significance to Beethoven's choice of the 'heroic' E-flat major as the sonata's key."¹

The hero in question was one of Beethoven's most loyal friends and patrons, as well as his private student of long standing: the Archduke Rudolph, youngest son of Emperor Leopold II. To him Beethoven dedicated many important works, including the fourth and fifth piano concertos, the Archduke Trio, the *Missa Solemnis*, and two sonatas: the *Hammerklavier*, and op.81a.

Of the events surrounding its composition Beethoven's biographer Alexander Thayer writes:

"... On May 4th, the Empress left Vienna with the Imperial family. (Napoleon's cannons were approaching the city.) Archduke Rudolph accompanied her, and Beethoven mourned his departure in the well-known first movement of the Sonata, Op. 81a. Beethoven's manuscript bears these inscriptions in his own hand: 'The Farewell, Vienna, May 4, 1809, on the departure of his Imperial Highness the revered Archduke Rudolph' ... "²

Following this wrenching 'departure', the second movement *arioso*, chromatically descending and harmonically wandering, describes Beethoven's loneliness during Rudolph's absence; then, through a subtle transformation in melodic direction (the despairing B natural morphs into C flat, which in turn melts into B flat), the rollicking last movement erases all the former melancholy, as the composer relates his ecstatic rejoicing on his friend's safe return.

Schubert: *Fantasy in C major*, op.15 ("Wanderer")

" - in a word, I feel myself the most unhappy and wretched creature in the world. Imagine a man whose health will never be right again, and who in sheer despair over this ever makes things worse and worse, instead of better; imagine a man, I say, whose most brilliant hopes have perished, to whom the happiness of love and friendship have nothing to offer but pain, at best, whose enthusiasm (at least of the stimulating kind) for all things beautiful threatens to disappear, and I ask you, is he not a miserable, unhappy being?"

When he speaks of his broken health, Schubert is referring specifically to syphilis, the then-incurable disease he contracted in the fall of 1822. Its onset in those months seems not only to have contributed to the putting aside of what we now call the 'Unfinished' Symphony but to cause him to return to a song he had penned six years earlier, *Der Wanderer* (D.489), whose lyrics echo the words in Schubert's letter:

Die Sonne dünkt mich hier so kalt,
Die Blüte welk, das Leben alt,
und was sie reddten, leerer Schall,
Ich bin ein Fremdling überall.

Here the sun seems so cold,
The blossom faded, life old,
And men's words mere hollow noise;
I am a stranger everywhere.

In the 'Wanderer' Fantasy, not only does the musical setting of this verse of the song become the theme for a set of variations (in the second movement): its three opening notes become the motto of the entire work. Whether its emphatic C major tonality was chosen to recall that of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as it too railed at fate and vanquished the dictate of its C minor opening we cannot know, but the heaven-storming last movement of the Fantasy gives notice that Schubert has decided to battle his death-sentence (it was another six years before he succumbed).

Prokofiev: *Third Sonata*, op.28 (1907, revised 1917 'from old notebooks')

"...I had no acquaintances among the girls at the Conservatory, although there was no lack of them: there were lots of them walking through the corridors or sitting on window ledges. But no opportunity to strike up an acquaintance had presented itself, and for some reason I wasn't able to bring it off by myself...I noticed several girls my own age and watched them during breaks between the academic classes. One of them had a rather strange last name: Eshe. When I wrote her name in French, "Eche", I noticed that each letter stood for a note. i.e. 'h' = B natural Remembering that music had been written on themes derived from names (for example, the variations on the name B-a-c-h), I tried to write a theme based on E-c-h-e. And since it struck me as successful, I used it - with imitations, at that - as the subordinate theme in my *Third Sonata*, which I was just starting to compose..."

"...In our class there were two girls, (Elizabeth) Eshe and Glagoleva, who behaved like fine young ladies and did not mix with the other students - especially the boys. I have already mentioned the Eshe girl in connection with the piece based on a theme using the letters of her last name. She was rather attractive. She was not very talkative, never ran through the corridors, and did her lessons well...."

"From the diary of Vera Alpers.
January 4 (17), 1909.

...Last night at the Conservatory soiree I was terribly happy. I don't know why, and I don't want to know. I spent a greater part of the evening with him....And yet he very much likes pretty faces, and that means a lot to him. Apparently he is not used to denying himself anything; and the Conservatory girls he knows – the ones he is attracted by, such as Eshe, Sadovskaya and Glagoleva – are rather free in their behaviour.”⁴

Prokofiev is a little less than forthcoming in the first excerpt quoted here; for far from being ‘subordinate’ in the sonata, the ‘Eche’ theme is at its heart. Not only is its semitone C-B the main motive (originating as F-E, which he is constantly shifting in implication between A minor/G sharp and C major/A flat), but the physical intertwining suggested in its ‘echo’ design is developed in numerous ways throughout the piece, climaxing in a ‘kiss’ between the performer’s hands.

The subtitle ‘from old notebooks’ suggests that for some reason he was able at some point to let go of this infatuation: and perhaps amid the destruction and chaos of 1917, nostalgia for the distant, idyllic world of 1907 played a part in its resurfacing. In any case, in the aftermath of the suicidal, trumpet-led cavalry charge of the last pages, it is permanently dashed.

(Footnotes)

1

Eytan Agmon,
‘Beethoven
’s Op.81a and the Psychology of Loss, in
Music Theory Online
1996

2

Thayer,
‘A Life of Beethoven
’ p.464.

3

letter, March 1824

4

from
*Prokofiev by Prokofiev: A Composer
’s Memoir*
(Doubleday 1979; transl. Guy Daniels)